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RUEHDJ/AMEMBASSY DJIBOUTI 3132
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SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR CA/EX, CA/VO/F/P, CA/VO/L/A

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/05/2019
TAGS: [CVIS](#) [CMGT](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [PREF](#) [ER](#)
SUBJECT: PROMOTING EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY FOR ANTI-REGIME
ERITREAN YOUTH

REF: A. ASMARA 142
[1](#)B. DYBDAHL-HACK EMAILS 20APR09 AND SUBSEQUENT

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald K. McMullen for reason 1.4(d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: In Eritrea, only the elderly and pro-regime individuals are allowed passports and exit visas to travel abroad. The regime closed the University of Asmara in 2005 and conscripts almost all young adults into open-ended national service, which borders on indefinite forced labor. Perhaps 215,000 young Eritreans have fled the country and molder in refugee camps in Sudan, Ethiopia, and elsewhere. Posts plans to restart visa services (completely suspended in 2007) for student visa applicants; we intend to give opportunities to study in the United States to those who oppose the regime, as well as others. Thus, Post requests that CA seek to establish a limited category-specific exemption to the passport requirement for Eritreans found eligible for student visas. Embassy Asmara employees eligible for Special Immigrant Visas should also be included in this narrow category. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (SBU) FLEEING IN DROVES, BUT THEN STUCK

Many young Eritreans long to study in the United States (ref A), apply to American universities, get accepted, and even get scholarships, but can't leave Eritrea legally unless they are relatives of regime insiders. For tens of thousands of young Eritreans, hope for a better future has been extinguished. Thousands cross illegally into Sudan; even those who acquire official refugee status find there is almost no chance for resettlement. Many spend years in hardscrabble refugee camps in eastern Sudan, subject to abuse, exploitation, and despair. Yet, tens of thousands find that preferable to living under one of the world's harshest dictatorships.

[1](#)3. (C) HOW THIS WOULD WORK

Post intends to begin adjudicating student visa applications, regardless of whether the regime is willing to issue the applicant an Eritrean passport and exit visa. If an applicant is otherwise found eligible for a student visa, Post will issue it in a Form DS-232. If the visa recipient can later convince the authorities in Asmara to issue a passport and exit visa, fine. Other visa recipients will undoubtedly make their way to Khartoum, where the Eritrean embassy is widely known to sell Eritrean passports to nearly all comers; with an Eritrean passport and an F1 visa in a

Form DS-232, the lucky young person is off to America. For those visa recipients who manage to leave the country and receive UNHCR refugee status, a UN-authorized travel document might allow the young person to travel to America with his or her F1 in the DS-232.

14. (C) SPECIAL IMMIGRANT VISAS

As Eritrea became independent only in 1993, many of our initial batch of FSNs are becoming eligible for 15-year Special Immigrant Visas (SIV). Normally SIVs require 20 years of USG employment, but Embassy Asmara's SIV applicants are frequently found eligible after 15 years due to the dangerous conditions in which they work. For example, since 2001 the regime has arrested and imprisoned 43 of our local employees; others have fled illegally to escape persecution. Several have returned to work after having been arrested, tortured, and eventually released. One was held in an underground cell for an entire year. Another lost 80% of his hearing after repeated beatings. Once they apply for and are found eligible for SIVs, our FSNs still must get Eritrean passports and exit permits. Currently four SIV-eligible FSNs are waiting to be issued Eritrean passports; they may never get them. Post has not stopped adjudicating SIVs, but we may start issuing them in DS-232s as events warrant.

15. (C) REQUEST: LIMITED CATEGORY-SPECIFIC EXEMPTION

Thanks to helpful background information from CA/VO (ref B) and other research, Post is familiar with INA 212 (d)(4)(A)

regarding waiver procedures for travelers without passports. While we don't expect a massive number of Eritreans without passports to receive student visas or Special Immigrant Visas, processing these cases individually would be quite costly in terms of time and USG human resources.

--Thus, Post requests that CA work with DHS to establish a limited category-specific exemption as per 22 CFR 41.3(g) that would encompass Eritreans who fully qualify for a student (F1) visa or SIV, except for the passport requirement. Please advise. Embassy point of contact is Consul Pam Hack. Post plans to begin accepting student visa applications from those with and without passports soon.

16. (C) COMMENT

Due to the Isaias regime's ongoing restrictions on Embassy Asmara, Post does not contemplate a resumption of full visa services in the near future. However, giving young Eritreans hope, the chance for an education, and the skills with which to rebuild their impoverished country in the post-Isaias period is one of the strongest signals we can send to the Eritrean people that the United States has not abandoned them. Were we to begin processing student visa applications and require a regime-issued passport, we would be seen as strengthening the dictatorship's hand. Thus, the limited category-specific exemption outlined above is key.

MCMULLEN